

The outlook of fire

The west is prone to wildland fire. Montana is no exception. As wildland fires increase in severity and size, so does the cost of suppression in terms of real dollars and loss of property and natural resources ~~other affects~~. The professional forestry community has produced a number of documents detailing the reasons behind the increasing severity and costs of fire. They include:

- Extended drought in the west;
- Increased development in the wildland urban interface, the area where development meets ~~forestlands~~ wildlands;
- An increase in fuel load in the forest from drought, disease and ~~lack of funding~~ legal gridlock for ~~proper~~ management projects on federal forests; and
 - USFS Comment: It isn't about lack of funding it is about a disagreement on what proper management is on public lands. People in this country are extremely interested in public lands as they know and understand their value.
- Inability of the forest service to address fuel load in the forest from drought and disease.
- Lack of ~~integration of adequate~~ resources ~~from for~~ local, state and federal agencies.
 - BLM Comment: We are concerned that this statement may be misconstrued. Our belief is that there is a phenomenal effort to work together on initial and extended attack among the fire suppression agencies in Montana. Fire crew from all agencies train, plan and implement fire suppress efforts wit the common understanding that no one agency can do it alone. Montana is composed of a checkerboard land ownership pattern with federal lands adjoining state and private lands throughout the state. Integration of resources and cooperation has enabled many successful initial attacks and fuel reduction efforts.
 - USFS Comment: In addition, we train, we plan and we implement together all the time and every time.

These factors may explain why fires are increasing in severity and cost, but on the Montana landscape there are other issues that increase the complexity of fire suppression. Such factors are:

- Diverging fire suppression polices between federal agencies and state agencies:
 - BLM Comment: We believe it is important to note that this statement is referring to polices that have been in existence for a decade. We also believe it is important to underscore that while there are differences in polices, the fires suppression agencies have been able to work together efficiently and effectively.
 - USFS Comment: It isn't divergent fire policies in fact there is agreement with the federal fire policy by the NASF (National Association of State Foresters). When we have a wildfire we all want to put it out in a safe and effective manner and our responses commensurate with the values to protect. WE are different with the wildland fire use program as federal fire agencies have the opportunity to use natural ignitions to accomplish resource objectives. Some state do this some don't. Montana does not. The item that drives the difference in tactics in a lot of situations are the Values to Protect.
- Decreased federal funding for land management activities;
 - USFS Comment: One of the primary reasons we (USFS) have less funding for land management activities is how we have increased our spending in putting fires out.
- Lack of resources to fully fund DNRC initial attack operations;
- Increased gas and diesel fuel costs;
- Uncertainty of the future of Plum Creek Lands; industrial and other private forest lands;
- Increased, and often unfunded, utilization of local government resources;
- Rising complexity of fires due to increased size, fire behavior, public expectations, and expanding, WUI;
 - USFS Comment: The fire environment has exceeded our (USFS) operational capacity in many instances. Fire Weather and Values to Protect are the two primary resources for this increased complexity....Fuels have contributed to a lesser degree.
- Decreased access to area wide resources; Increased competition for national fire fighting resources;
 - BLM Comment: We are not sure what this statement means is this referring to contracting issues? Please clarify
 - USFS Comment: It isn't about more it is about being effect and mobility of our resources to be in the right place at the right time. More resources in the Fire Season 2007 would have made little difference on most of these large fires.
- Widespread effects of poor air quality;
- Spotty Inconsistent rehabilitation of burnt lands and watersheds;
- Concern for succession planning ~~in the~~ of fire management ~~field personnel~~;
 - BLM Comment: This is a shared concern at the federal level as well.
- Stress on Montana wildland fire fighters; managers and local government resources;
 - BLM Comment: This is also seen in the dedicated individuals within the federal sector.
- Increased budget pressures on federal agencies to decrease fire suppression costs, which limits the FS ability to manage the forest, and reduce risk to fires fighters, and;
 - USFS Comment: The pressure on federal agencies is to be effective and not waste money not decrease it.
- Public expectations for rapid fire suppression and real time information.

- Decreased access to forest resources due to the closure of existing road currently used for fire suppression.

These factors will continue to hamper fire suppression activities. Those pressures remain long after the last fire is declared contained. After on the ground work is completed, the financial side continues. The process of cost sharing with federal partners and obtaining FEMA reimbursement is often not completed within the fiscal year. This creates another set of Montana concerns such as:

- The ability to cash flow the entire cost of fire, prior to obtaining payment from federal partners;
- Ability for DNRC to maintain department operations until a supplemental appropriation can be approved by the legislature;
- The pressure to settle one fire season, while another fire season begins; and
- Stress on the limited number of individuals who are dedicated to the business side of fire.

When all factors are rolled together, the day to day fire suppression and the business aftermath are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, and increasingly difficult for the state to fund. The traditional funding mechanism to pay state costs through a supplemental appropriation was not viable for the past fire season and resulted in a special session to appropriate funds to cover the cost. This raised the question of “Who should pay the state share?” Should it be a combination of?

- Landowners in the wildland urban interface;
- Landowners who benefit from direct protection services and county cooperative assistance; or
- The state general fund.
- The urban centers that benefit from having a wildland urban interface. (The urban center would be the interface without the rural populace standing between them and the wildfire.)
- Insurance companies and other beneficiaries of fire suppression.

Fire season and the associated smoke impacts is a regular part of life in Montana. Given the identified pressures, pending changes and financial issues, the outcome of future fire seasons is at-risk uncertain. The state must examine proposals to make changes to the status quo to make an impact on the future success of fire suppression.

Conclusion:

- With limited resources, and fuel and climatic conditions, it is likely that communities will burn, and firefighter and members of the public will be seriously injured or killed. just a matter of time before numerous houses or even a few towns burn.
 - BLM Comment: This may be an excellent opportunity to stress the importance of private property owners sharing in the responsibility of following firewise guidelines. Establishing zoning and building guidelines can also aid in protecting homes and communities.
- Stress of fire season will continue to rise, affecting landowners, firefighters, business owners, state and federal agencies as well as other members of the public.
- With limited resources to fight fires, the costs for fire suppression and the damage to property and resources will continue to grow.
 - BLM Comment: We agree with this statement. However, we believe it is also important to point out that there may be situations with poor weather conditions, excessive fuels or challenging terrain, that even the most valiant fire suppression efforts and resources may not be enough.
 - USFS Comment: We need to understand that we can never put fires out in fire dependent ecosystems, we can delay them from occurring but our strategies and tactics need to be built on how are we going to learn how to live with fire in our fire dependent ecosystems.
- Small businesses from tourism to farms and ranches will continue to be hurt from fires impacted as they are unable to be compensated for business losses due to fires.
- ~~With the declining federal forest fuel reduction program and no comparable state programs, even where fuel reduction is possible, there will be little or none completed, therefore contributing to future fires.~~
 - BLM Comment: We question this conclusion. All the federal suppression agencies dedicate as much funding as possible to treatments and have seen many positive results from these efforts. Our share goal is to continue fuels reduction projects.
 - USFS Comment: We can always blame our issues on lack of funding we receive a lot of money for fuels work on NFS lands and private land. One million private and 14 million FS FY08 so the conclusion should be how to most effectively utilize these resources over time to make a difference. We are not going to accomplish this in one year nor ten years... it will be 50 years so lets figure it out together.
- Declining fuel reduction funds and lack of landowner incentives to treat fuels will ensure continued risk of complex WUI fires.
- The WUI will continue to increase without adequate controls on land development.

- The ineffective management of the over accumulation of forest fuels on federal lands has created a forest health crisis, putting many communities in imminent danger of catastrophic wildfires.
- This lack of aggressive management is largely due to the inability of the federal agencies to expedite fuel reduction projects as the resources for them get consumed in litigation.
- Conflict will grow between the state, federal, private and local policies regarding fire suppression, thus affecting cooperation of how fires are fought and suppressed.
 - BLM Comment: Based on our past successes and ability to work together, we do not agree with this conclusion. Ground level cooperation is very strong in Montana.
 - USFS Comment: Totally Disagree. The ever increasing complexity of the fire environment will require all partners to work even more closely together in the future than we have in the past if we will have any chance for success. Example for the Fire Season 2007 because we used less resources on some of the high elevation FS fires we were able to allocate more resources to the Black Cat, Jocko and Chippy fires that were state fires that had higher resource values to protect.
 - One of the most egregious offenders regarding the high cost of fire suppression is the US Congress, who has not funded the removal of fuels in our forest, and have tied the hands of the forest service in managing our forests. The unwillingness of congress to properly fund the forest service will not change until a catastrophic fire event, not unlike 1910, occurs in this country, and hundreds of people are killed, thousands of homes destroyed and towns obliterated.

Overall comments

One of the first things that has to happen is the agencies that have the responsibility for public land (DNRC, FOREST SERVICE, ETC) need to have the same fire suppression plan. It doesn't not make sense for a federal agency to have "most appropriate response" where in the forest service flies over a fire and it is called initial attack and the DNRC and local government fire agencies are full suppression firefighters on all wild land responses. It is difficult to see how we can have the federal agencies with the most money, resources and land, have a different set of goals. The Chiefs of local government fire departments feel that we have a good working relationship with the DNRC and want to see that relationship enhanced wherever possible. Strong initial attack has kept the vast majority of wild land fires in Montana small and therefore least expensive. Any move away from strong initial attack will see the growth of more fires into large unmanageable fires that have millions of dollars thrown at them with little or no effect. (Montana State Fire Chiefs Association)

The insurance companies should play a role in helping police where homes are built. (Sen. Hansen)

Key – Black – original text by LFD

Blue – DNRC

Green – BLM

Red – USFS

Orange – Senator Liable

Purple – Representative Vincent